The Satyashodhak's Christian Servant

The Inner Life of Jyotibha Phule

Author: G. M. Nalavade

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Preface

Three generations ago, a man from our own family lived and passed away. The difficult occasion has now arrived -not merely to write about the life of someone else's ancestor, but of one's own great-grandfather. As the saying goes: 'If you speak, the father is shamed; if you stay silent, the family name is lost.' Speaking means exposing the faults of a man from one's own lineage; staying silent means allowing the nation to sink further into decline. In such a predicament, the voice of conscience alone says: 'Let the old woman die -it is for the best! But do not let time be wasted.'

Our grandfather, who passed away thirty-five years ago -I do not believe he would be angry at anyone writing a preface to his biography, because if a stranger or a relative narrates and praises the work done through direct deeds and genuine effort, the man of action himself would only feel pleased.

Poor Jyotiba

During his lifetime, his own household members -his real and step-brothers -would ridicule and despise him on account of his conduct, which they considered to be treacherous to religion and the nation. Not only that -they refused to set foot in each other's homes. Such was the condition of this poor man while he was alive, and even

After Death

Even after death, real nephews and close relatives were alive, yet according to Hindu religious custom -it was considered more meritorious for a nephew to pour water (perform last rites) than a son. All the idol-worship that Hindus follow -from Mhasoba to the most exalted deities -was denounced by him in the most obscene language. He called Sant Dnyaneshwar, Ramdas, Mukund and other saints 'eunuchs' (napunsak),

described their sacred texts like the Dnyaneshwari as utterly worthless, and endlessly glorified Christianity's so-called equality and generosity.

Baseness

What sort of baseness was this? To say that a man who had apostasized from his own religion and caste was born into our family is truly shameful to declare. But there is no escape from it. Just as the great saint Tukaram Maharaj was born into a noble family, yet a low and vile man like Chandrarao More -who tried to plant thorns in Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj's path of independence and even plotted his murder -was also born from the same lineage, so too does fate arrange such contradictions.

In their eagerness to erect a statue in Jyotirao's memory, the Satyashodhaki Marathas restricted the effort exclusively to Marathas, excluding all other communities. These same Satyashodhak Marathas -who claim to oppose caste distinctions -are actually perpetuating a Maratha vs. non-Maratha division. Using the label of 'non-Brahmin' to stir conflict while actually serving their own self-interest, they drag Jyotibha's memory through the mud.

Introduction

The statue of Ke. Jyotiba Phule has been the subject of much fanfare for many days now. People began asking: who was this great man, who had quietly earned the fame that could now justify erecting a statue, whose name has been maintained with humility until his passing? Leaving aside communal or partisan pride, any sensible person would agree that genuinely great men deserve proper memorials. I too was among those who felt that if Jyotiba Phule was truly a great man, a statue would not be inappropriate. Yet I knew nothing about his true worth, the lasting work he left behind, or how learned he was -and I had never felt the need to find out.

Some days before this, I happened to be speaking with a Christian missionary who praised Jyotiba at great length. He seemed to assume I was a Satyashodhak myself. At the end of the conversation he said:

"Your caste has helped the cause of Jesus far more than its own interests. He was a very great man."

I could not quite grasp the full meaning of his words, but the desire to learn more about Jyotiba was kindled within me. It was further stoked by a recently published book by an enemy of the country. After that, I began putting in serious effort to gather information about Jyotiba.

Dishonoured by a Countryman

Tracing the life of a great man is not difficult. Their deeds and greatness cause the common masses to fall into a kind of reverential frenzy, and their memory is perpetuated across generations. Stories about great men are told and retold from household to household for centuries. Even the family of an ordinary well-known person

will keep the stories alive for a generation or two. Additionally, the writings of the great man, the newspapers of his era, and the first-hand accounts of those who knew him in life can all provide vital information. I spent two months gathering such material, diving into this living ocean -and whatever pearls, shells, and thorns I found are laid out on the following pages for the reader.

When the question of public interest arises, caste pride and partisan allegiance must be set aside. With this spirit, I began my research into whether Jyotiba had genuinely worked for the uplift of farmers and therefore deserved a memorial. The unhappy truth, however, is that the depths of this ocean held quite different contents than I had hoped.

The Biography of Ke. Jyotiba Phule

The protagonist Jyotiba Phule's ancestral village was Katgun in Satara district. The family surname was Gore (meaning 'fair'). The ancestors were village headmen (chougule) at Katgun. It was there that Jyotiba's great-grandfather reportedly quarrelled with the village accountant (kulkarni) and murdered him -a fact mentioned in all available biographies, which all appear to derive from the same source. How he escaped punishment is unknown. Thereafter, the family abandoned their village and settled in Khanvadi in Purandar taluka, but finding poor prospects there, Jyotiba's grandfather Satvaji (also known as Shetibha) set out for Pune.

In Pune, Satvaji had a maternal uncle named Zagade who lived in a new part of the city. Satvaji went to stay with him. There, Satvaji had three sons: Ranoji, Krishna, and Govinda. Shortly after the children were born, Satvaji died and uncle Zagade raised them. But Krishna and Govinda behaved badly, so Zagade separated them from the household, keeping only Ranoji, whose good conduct eventually earned him the entire Zagade estate. Zagade taught Ranoji and his brothers the trade of floristry. Ranoji became so skilled at flower decorations and garlands that Krishna and Govinda's interests lay elsewhere entirely.

A Taste for Idleness

Ranoji's floral work grew in demand and eventually reached the Peshwa court. On one occasion, Ranoji's floral arrangement was so exquisite that Shrimant Peshwa himself wore the garland to court and was so pleased that he asked Ranoji to name his reward. Ranoji requested twenty-five acres of land near the Swar Gate in Pune, and the Peshwa granted it. That land remains in the family's possession to this day. From that time onwards, the family dropped their original surname 'Gore' and became known as 'Phule' (meaning 'flowers/floristry'), and they established themselves well in the city. Ranoji redistributed the work -setting up a flower shop in Shukravar Peth for Krishna, while Govinda went to the countryside for farming. But Govinda could not manage and returned to Pune. Govinda's life remained one of modest hardship, and it was in this household that Jyotiba was born in Pune in 1823.

Family Tree

Satvaji

├── Ranoji → Babaji
├── Krishna → ....
└── Govinda → Jyotiba → Bhau / Mahadev → Baburao Phule (Mun. Comm.) / Vishwanath / Sitaram

Jyotiba was born into overall humble circumstances, and within his first year of life his pious mother passed away.

The Missionaries' Foothold

Christian missionaries were spreading their influence at this time. However, they faced significant resistance from the old Brahmin class in Pune. Around this period, there were reports of children going missing near Mithganj Peth, and the Hindu community grew deeply anxious. The prevailing belief was that the newly arrived black-robed missionaries (Jesuit priests) were behind the disappearances. One day, a child from that neighbourhood actually went missing, and people were incensed. Jyotiba tried to calm the enraged crowd and declared the missionaries innocent. A Brahmin householder, however, visited the missionaries to investigate and received evasive answers -which only strengthened his suspicion that they were guilty. When this gentleman informed the local people, Jyotiba sided with the missionaries and began abusing the Brahmins.

Entry into the Christian Mission School

Through his son's connections, Govindrao (Jyotiba's father) obtained employment with the missionaries. Jyotiba himself, climbing the steps of the church with wooden clogs, began attending English classes inside.

Jyotiba's formal schooling lasted no more than two years. Nevertheless, his association with the missionaries became so deep that it would shape his entire life. From that point onward, Jesus's beloved agents took care of Jyotiba's livelihood for the rest of his life.

The Unbroken Thread of the Creator's Design

Its origin was here. The priests had faced trouble and injury primarily from Brahmins, and so the Brahmin community sat like a thorn in their eye. And it was this feeling that Jyotiba -now fully 'Christianized' in spirit -would exploit.

The Christianized Jyotiba

By the time Jyotiba had grown a moustache (i.e., came of age), his association with the missionaries had made him contemptuous of Hinduism, Hindu society, his own customs, and his own wife. He began to feel that he should live exactly like a European sahib. Because of this behaviour, his own caste members stopped accepting him -they considered him an outcast. His wayward conduct meant he could no longer shelter under the protection of his own community.

The Satyashodhak Samaj

The Founding of the Satyashodhak Samaj

The founding of this Society is the central event of this biography! Readers will come to understand its founder from the narrative that follows. Suffice it to say here that the Satyashodhak Samaj was, in effect, a new religious sect -as is evident from Jyotiba's own writings. The 'new religion' established by Jyotiba was, in essence:

Gulamgiri (Slavery)

This was his foundational text. Without the author's name, if one were to read this book, it would appear to have been written by a foreign missionary. This fact reveals the deep secret of Jyotiba's biography and the true nature of the Satyashodhak Samaj -which discerning readers should carefully note.

A Sample of the Content

As a brief introduction to this foundational text: every Hindu deity -from Matsya (fish), Kurma (tortoise), Varaha (boar), Narasimha (man-lion) and other avatars of Adinarayan, all the way down to the village deity Mhasoba -was denounced by him in the most obscene language. Saints like Dnyaneshwar, Ramdas, Tukaram, and Mukund were called 'eunuchs.' Their sacred texts like the Dnyaneshwari were declared worthless. Meanwhile, the 'equality' and 'liberality' of Christianity were endlessly extolled.

Work in the Municipality & Schools

By the age of 25, Jyotiba's public work began to come into view. His education lasted two years in English and five to six years in Marathi. The English knowledge he had -whatever it was -he had not independently studied any foreign languages. Whatever little scholarly recognition he gained was because missionaries placed his name on texts that they themselves composed. The first school Jyyotiba opened was for girls, but as soon as it was established, the missionaries took it over from Jyotiba. Jyotiba's role was that of primary teacher. His main teachers were European missionaries themselves. Later, in 1848, Jyotiba opened a school for Marathi people in the premises of a Brahmin family on Wednesdays.

The Death of Jyotiba

One day, a Maratha shepherd -a simple, devout warkari pilgrim -was making his way to Alandi. He was chanting a devotional hymn to Lord Hari with heartfelt sincerity:

"At whose door stands the golden Pimpal tree? What great strength dwells there!" -spoke the bull.

As this simple man was walking along singing this abhang (devotional verse), the 'learned' Jyotiba confronted him and asked the meaning of the song. The man was not

English-educated; he had never entered a church; he had no priest-sahib connections; no shawls had been draped around his shoulders as patronage. He was an ordinary man who simply remembered the words of the saints -Dnyandev, Tukaram, Ramdas. When Jyotiba accosted him and demanded he show him the 'golden Pimpal tree,' the pilgrim promised to do so and asked Jyotiba to come to Alandi.

Jyotiba went to Alandi after lunch. But as soon as he arrived, he was struck by a severe bout of diarrhoea and was completely unable to leave the privy -let alone look for a sacred tree. He pleaded with the pilgrim to spare him and let him return to Pune. He returned -and the illness that had struck him at Alandi never left him. The diarrhoea progressed into a permanent paralysis (stroke). And in this pitiable condition, in the year 1890, the founder of the Satyashodhak Samaj, the instrument of the missionaries, the destroyer of the Brahmin-Hindu tradition —

The Dark Star of a Dark Sky

-fell from his orbit and dissolved into the gutter of the world. On that day the great stench of the world was removed, and the rain-god shed tears of grief and swept the earth clean. Everywhere there was one voice of sorrow -from women and men alike - declaring: 'Today the earth has been made lighter. The ember lodged in the heart of Hinduism has at last been extinguished!!!'

At Jyotiba's death, his friends and associates were distressed. His family members were present but they had always considered him a renegade, so none of his relatives came for the final rites. Of his friends, only five to twenty-five came -and even among them, no one stepped forward to light the funeral pyre. Then Yashwantrao, the orphan boy whom Jyotiba had raised as his own son, stepped forward and performed the last rites.

Conclusion

How the movement of the Satyashodhak Samaj continued after Jyotiba's passing will be revealed in the future. Some people today say that one should not judge Jyotiba by the actions of present-day showman Satyashodhaks. But there is really no reason to make such a distinction -for just as a teacher shapes his disciples in his own mould, disciples worthy of their guru continue to be produced. If the readers have gained some true knowledge from this account, the author considers his purpose fulfilled.

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Note: This is a faithful English translation of the original Marathi pamphlet published in 1925. The views expressed are entirely those of the original author and do not represent the views of the translator.